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Hungry, Happy Ramadan

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The sky is still dark when I get up to prepare a light meal for my family—sometimes oatmeal or soup, often sandwiches and fruit. A half-hour before the first light appears, I wake my husband and older children, and we eat a meal that must take our bodies through the whole day.

In Oman, the country in the Middle East where I live with my family, we hear a caller announcing the morning prayer. This ends the time when we are allowed to eat. From that point on until sunset, we will not eat or drink anything—not a bite of food, not a sip of water.

It is the holy month of Ramadan (rah mah DAHN), one of the hardest but happiest times of the year for Muslims. The month starts when the crescent moon of the ninth Islamic month appears. Every day for the following twenty-nine or thirty days, Muslims everywhere in the world observe the fast.

Sometimes the days pass slowly. We try to find ways to keep busy, to take our minds off our growling stomachs and dry mouths. It helps to imagine being in a place where the people have no food or clean water. Then we become thankful that in just a few hours we will have food and drink to relieve our discomfort.

Sometimes, though, the fasting is so hard that all we can do is lie down for a nap. It would be very easy for a person to sneak food or drink, yet we do not. Although it is difficult, we are happy to be fasting.

We observe the fast because in our holy book, the Qur'an (kor AHN), God, whom Muslims call Allah, tells us that fasting will teach us to control ourselves and to obey Him. It will also make us thankful for the blessings God has given to us. When we do without these blessings, we appreciate them more. When we feel hunger and thirst, we remember those who do not have what they need, and we realize

how fortunate we are. This makes us want to share what we have with others. Sharing and feeling grateful make us happy.

When the sun goes down during Ramadan, street vendors in Oman sell all kinds of fried and baked treats filled with meats and vegetables.

By late afternoon we start to prepare the meal we will eat once the sun sets. Even though the sight and smell of food make us hungrier, we know we will soon be eating. Everyone begins to feel more energetic. The younger children, who are not fasting, enjoy sitting in the busy kitchen. They like to watch me chop, stir, and bake. Soup and bread, finger snacks, and fresh vegetables and fruits begin to fill plates.

The sky begins to lose color, and we prepare plates of food to send to our neighbors. Our neighbors will also send their children to us with plates of goodies, such as pudding and fried meat-filled pastries. This sharing is part of the spirit of Ramadan.

Reading the Qur'an is an important part of Ramadan.

Then the time comes when we are called to sunset prayer. Relief passes over our faces as we take our first sips of liquid, our first bites of food since before dawn.

The work of Ramadan does not end with the evening meal. Ramadan is not just about hunger and thirst. It is also about remembering God and struggling to make oneself better. We try to read the entire Qur'an during the month and to learn more about our religion. We say special prayers in the mosque or at home and try to perfect and lengthen our regular five daily prayers. We focus on giving charity to the poor. Many of us realize that once we get used to doing these good things for a month, it will be easier to continue doing them after Ramadan is over.

A special prayer is part of Eid ul-Fitr, the "fast-breaking festival" celebrated after Ramadan ends.

Ramadan ends when Muslims can see the crescent moon for the next month. Indeed, there is no fasting the next day.

Eid ul-Fitr (EE dul FIT er) is the "fast-breaking festival." It starts the morning after the last day of Ramadan. Muslim families give generously to the poor to help them participate in the happy festivities with clean clothes and good food. Everyone dresses in his or her best clothes and lines up together, shoulder to shoulder, to perform a special prayer, either in the local mosque or a public place, such as a park or meeting hall. We thank God and praise Him. Then we listen to a talk about the importance of the holiday. We pray for ourselves, for our families and friends, and for those who need help.

After the prayer, Muslims spend the day greeting others, visiting friends and relatives, exchanging gifts, and relaxing. After a month of fasting, eating is a big part of the day, with special foods like rich meats, fluffy breads, and sweets.

By the end of the day, everyone is full, tired, and relieved. Yet at the same time, there is a feeling of something missing when Ramadan ends. Beginning the following day, we start to look forward to the next year's hungry, happy month.

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